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Items for discussion and decision: management issues in national statistical offices: access to microdata

Report of the Australian Bureau of Statistics on principles and guidelines for managing statistical confidentiality and microdata access

Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with a request of the Statistical Commission at its thirty-seventh session,** the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the Statistical Commission a report on managing statistical confidentiality and microdata access. The report has been prepared by the Australian Bureau of Statistics on behalf of the Task Force on Confidentiality and Microdata, which was constituted by the Conference of European Statisticians. The report examines the value of granting microdata access to the research community, at both the national and international levels. It points to the potential risks in microdata release and provides some principles for managing issues of confidentiality and maintaining public trust. The report also identifies some emerging practices whereby developing countries release their microdata access through data repositories. Points for discussion by the Commission are contained in paragraph 10 of the report.

* E/CN.3/2007/1.

** See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2006, Supplement No. 4* (E/2006/24), chap 1, sect. B.

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I. Introduction

1. The item "Management issues in national statistical offices" has been a regular element of the Statistical Commission's multi-year programme. At its thirty-seventh session, in 2006, the Commission made access to microdata its theme for this agenda item.[1]

2. In consultation with the members of the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the United Nations Statistics Division invited the Bureau to prepare, for the Commission's consideration, a report on managing statistical confidentiality and microdata access, to guide interested national statistical offices on their release of microdata. The Bureau is the chair of the Task Force convened by the Conference of European Statisticians to review this issue.

3. The present report builds on the principles and guidelines developed by the Task Force[2] on statistical confidentiality and microdata. It adds relevant text to those principles and guidelines, aiming at a wider application, especially in the context of developing countries. In particular, a section was added on the emergence of data repository services to promote international access to microdata, increasingly being explored by some countries.

4. A first draft of this report was circulated to members of the Commission that were not members of the Conference of European Statisticians and to several other national statistical offices for review. The reviewers' comments have been incorporated into the final report, which will be published in the near future. In addition, the reviewers made suggestions on how better to promote microdata access from the developing countries' perspective; these suggestions may be summarized as follows:

(a) The principles contained in the report were well appreciated by countries. There is, however, a need for more specific guidelines on how such systems of data access could set up the necessary safeguards, with particular attention given to reflecting variations in the needs of countries at different levels of statistical development;

(b) While many of the issues of microdata access are confronted by developing and developed countries alike, the practices and circumstances governing data release are not necessarily the same. Case studies should therefore include practices of national statistical offices from different regions, especially from those that are not so advanced, so that the observations and guidelines may be more in line with the circumstances of these countries. In addition, it would be useful to include case studies that address issues of cost-sharing arrangements and the sale of anonymized samples, as practised by some national statistical offices, in particular in developed regions;

(c) National statistical offices need to be assisted with building their capacity, not only to make their microdata readily available but also to effectively manage issues of confidentiality, with the requisite follow-ups and response, to ensure compliance. Although the software for confidentializing data sets and

[1] See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2006, Supplement No. 4* (E/2006/24), chap. I, para. 2 (c).

[2] The Task Force was chaired by Australia (Dennis Trewin), with Canada, Denmark, Georgia, Italy and Poland, as members.

detailed statistical tables is available, many developing countries would require training as well as some facilitation to acquire them. National statistical offices would also need training in the preparation of support documentation and metadata, all of which should be anticipated from the inception of the survey;

(d) While there are unarguably great benefits to national statistical offices having their data used more widely, and out of necessity many have had to rely on the research community, consideration should be given to strengthening national statistical offices institutionally, to conduct some research in-house and, where applicable, with the collaboration of the research community;

(e) There is also a need to raise the awareness of researchers and other microdata users on the limitations of the data, particularly with respect to the lowest level of disaggregation that the survey design would permit. This would avert the abuse and misuse of data and embarrassing outcomes for national statistical offices.

II. Points for discussion

5. **The Statistical Commission, may wish to:**

(a) **Discuss the applicability and relevance of the proposed guidelines;**

(b) **Give guidance on the process for their adoption as guidelines for the global statistical system and suggest possible actions for their promotion and implementation;**

(c) **Advise on the desirability of international agencies acting as data repositories for interested countries and on the necessary safeguards.**